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Lebanese Migration to the Americas

When compared with demographic movements throughout the ages, Lebanese migration to the Americas, which began more than a century ago, displays characteristics that distinguish it from migration streams from other countries – be it to this continent or to Europe.

The causes are the same – flight from tyrannical, despotic governments, repressive dictatorships, internal conflicts and desperate economic conditions that offer no prospect of achieving a decent standard of living. The most significant difference between other migrations and the Lebanese exodus was that the emigrants of that epoch left their country with no intention of returning. They bid their homeland a definitive farewell and the links they maintained with their place of origin in the beginning, via letters and personal greetings conveyed by successive waves of emigrants, gradually dwindled and lapsed until they were severed completely.

Once installed in their new home, the emigrants' knowledge of their country was no greater or smaller than that of any resident who reads and listens to items of news relating to strange locations and unfamiliar geography.

The Lebanese immigrants came from all walks of life, ranging from the indigent and desperate to the wealthy and powerful. Some arrived with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Others already had businesses set up and contacts that had been established in European countries. The same diversity was to be found in their levels of culture and education. Some had had little formal instruction; others were well-versed in languages and knowledgeable on foreign cultures and their current affairs and politics – professors and civil servants who were forced to abandon their professions and make a living in trade or business.

The difference between the Lebanese and emigrants from other countries was also evident in the long sea passage that they undertook. Given that it was not unusual for a voyage to last two to three months, passengers had to prepare carefully for the crossing. This was not a

case of slinging a bag over their shoulder or loading up a beast of burden or tagging along with the first improvised means of transport that presented itself. Preparations for the journey lasted months, sometimes over a year.

Saying goodbye meant farewell forever. Some of those staying behind promised their friends and relatives that they would follow their loved ones at a later date and join them in their new country of residence. Those embarking made no promises to send money back to those remaining behind; that was not the purpose of their journey. They were fleeing their homeland, albeit fleeing in an orderly fashion. Even those people leaving because of the threat posed by foreign invaders had much in common with those emigrants who were going through the proper channels to take formal leave of their country. All arrived on the shores of the Americas united in the newness of their condition, as if they had all planned the same trip together with the same tour operator and with one group leader. Migrants the world over tend largely to travel alone or to fall in with another traveller. The wave of Lebanese emigration a century or more ago was not characterised by any such uniformity of number. Some embarked alone but subsequently hitched up with the group of compatriots they found themselves sailing with. Others planned their voyage in a group of two or three friends. Many emigrants were newly married couples. Other man-and-wife pairs boarded the steamer with one or more children in tow, with a cousin or other relative making up the party for good measure. Yet whether they travelled alone or as a group of friends, as a family unit or in a loosely-knit bunch of like-minded individuals, all were at pains to make the trip with their identity papers in order, valid both in their country of origin and in the country of destination.

After the voyage, the processing formalities on arrival were no great ordeal. The customs authorities, especially those in Central and South America, were quite tolerant. The arrival of people from such a faraway land caused a sensation at first, and precautions were taken on account of the differences between the religious faiths of the respective groups. The new arrivals were soon assimilated, however, both in number and religion. People soon realised that they had come not to ask for alms but to work. Many immigrants possessed some form of start-up capital, however paltry, signifying their intention to invest. There is the story of a man with neither identity papers nor money

who entered the country secretly, evading the authorities, but there is no record of him committing any felony once this misdemeanour was behind him.

The distant origin of the travellers was soon the talk of the host countries' inhabitants. One had only to mention the *Thousand and One Nights* and the myths that circulated, spread from person to person in hushed, fantasy-filled tones. And within a short space of time, the religious beliefs of the Lebanese had ceased to be a cause for concern. Not once did the immigrants try to flaunt their religion or use it as a vehicle for spreading their own culture. Those among them who were not Maronites – the religion closest in nature to the Catholicism of the majority of the inhabitants of South and Central America – refrained from practising their particular branch of Islam in public or from setting out to instil their religious tenets in others. In fact, from the second generation onwards, baptisms and marriages were celebrated according to the ecclesiastical rituals imposed by the government of the day. Religious differences posed no hindrance to the Lebanese in their efforts to assimilate into the various countries of the continent.

The registration process at customs was largely free of formalities. Once the processing of the first wave of Lebanese immigrants had gone ahead without problems the authorities in the ports of Latin America dropped their initial wariness. Many new arrivals had some means of supporting themselves, which in turn meant that benefits filtered through to the economies of the host countries. Their identity papers were in order and presented no irregularities to hinder the issuing of residence permits. It was only the travellers themselves who found fault with the registration process: they were from Lebanon and as such compelled to travel on Turkish passports. This was the era of the Ottoman Empire, and Lebanon, which was under its hegemony, was considered a Turkish province. Lebanon as an autonomous entity had ceased to exist.

Neither did language pose even the slightest problem for the swift integration of the new arrivals. Many of the travellers had started taking lessons in the new language even before they made the trip. All of them mastered the rudiments of communication within the first few months, allowing them to cultivate initial relationships with their neighbours. Men especially proved proficient in learning Spanish – or

Portuguese for those who settled in Brazil. Men were more active in public and their business affairs involved constant communication with people around them. Many of them were also professionals who had brought with them from Lebanon their solid grounding in cultural knowledge. Women tended to learn more slowly as they had less contact with people outside the Lebanese community. It is interesting to note that women learned their first words and basic grammar by interacting with their own domestic employees at home.

The swift integration of the Lebanese with the local inhabitants was also due to the similarity of their customs. Families from both groups had similar structures and conducted themselves in more or less the same way – large families with many children, adherence to the rules of the group, absolute respect for one’s elders, religious observance, a friendliness towards and readiness to help others ... Business was conducted in conjunction with social get-togethers. Signatories to a contract were also signing into a friendship. Greetings in the street inevitably led to invitations to this or that home.

The first role of the Lebanese in Central and South America was that of the trader. They became known for their habit of going from house to house and offering their goods for sale. The novelty value of this system secured them a lot of and income. The vendor travelled with one or two suitcases filled with products and sold them on credit, his motto being that they could settle up another day, the important thing being that customers be happy and able to pay without having the impression that they were being charged too much. The vendor left his wares – mostly textiles – with the customer and returned the next day to collect the money. His wares might stem from the domestic market or be imported goods.

An in-depth analysis might well come to the conclusion that of all the things that unite and separate two communities – in this case the Lebanese and the Latin American – food is the most important. Many are the differences in diet and methods of preparation. Just as the Lebanese adapted to the diet of the people around them, so their hosts got used to eating the dishes of the Lebanese, first as friends in their houses, later as patrons in their cafes and restaurants. Not all the ingredients for the dishes could be found in the local shops and markets, however, which led to the springing up of firms dealing in imported

commodities within the Lebanese community. In the markets, for instance, it was possible to find aubergines and courgettes.

Nowadays people are familiar with the dishes even if they do not eat them regularly. Many dishes are well known in Central and South America: humus, kibbeh, tabboule, warak arish, rice with almonds, mahluta. Preparing the dishes is no longer the preserve of Lebanese women; women from the host community, domestic employees in the homes of Lebanese, learned how to prepare Lebanese dishes, learned other uses for ingredients they were already familiar with and got to know new foods. And now, decades later, many Latin American women – and men – own and operate cafes and restaurants offering every kind of Lebanese cuisine imaginable.

Commerce, the main and almost exclusive occupation of the immigrants, was extended to include other activities. Initially the main new development concerned the sheer volume of textile imports and their distribution throughout the towns, villages and outlying districts. The commercial instincts of the new community knew no bounds. Business conducted with native textile companies came to exceed the expectations of their owners and managers, who were also surprised by the variety of new imported goods. Fine fabrics of all kinds, undercutting the purveyors of more exclusive textiles, gradually became easier to obtain. They came from Lebanon, France and England. Silk, satin, poplin and wool processed using a different method than that familiar to the locals ... all could be seen decking the shop windows and shelves of the new shops.

The business world split into two branches: corporate and industrial. From the first immigrants onwards there were many instances of multiple activities. In Colombia the first riverboat company – and with it a number of important projects organised for the benefit of the shipping companies – were the fruit of Lebanese partnerships, as were the rail companies and firms associated with other means of transport. Commerce, based initially on imports, developed to embrace industry and had soon extended to the export business. Lebanese shops appeared in the main shopping areas of Latin American cities. They were dubbed the “Turkish shops”, Turks being the name the locals used for the Lebanese since it was the epoch of the Ottoman Empire and in the countries under its sway the Turkish passport was used.

The immigrants were not treated as common labourers by the rest of the populace but rather moved in business circles and enjoyed a commensurately high social status. This was in stark contrast to immigrants who arrived as labourers in more highly developed countries and as a consequence were always considered as having a lower status. The social standing enjoyed by the Lebanese meant their children grew up in the bosom of society, as if their families had always belonged to the core founding group, and their relations with other people at school and at work were no different to the relationship between different groups of host-country inhabitants. Whatever label the Lebanese were tagged with – "Turks" or some other name – the appellation implied a certain intimacy and affection and was no different to the nicknames given to any other social group, with no intention of marginalizing it but, rather, akin to a name given to the members of a welcome and sorely needed group of people.

People still remember how some immigrants adapted their Arabic surnames to a phonetic version that more closely approximated the Castilian language, changing the spelling not because the Arab surnames made the Lebanese less acceptable as pillars of society but rather in order to facilitate conversations and so foster personal and professional relations. The role they played in all areas of society was exemplary, given the economic support they provided, their culture and the humane way in which they conducted themselves, working alongside the key leading figures of each country.

Enjoying the support of society as they did, descendants of the Lebanese were able from the first generation onwards to aspire to any type of profession or position in the labour market. Many devoted themselves to following in their parents' footsteps as commercial traders, profiting from their position within the most prosperous occupation in the economies of the continent. Other individuals showed a keen interest in the fields of economics, politics, science, the arts and all areas of culture. The importance of this should not be underestimated. They were given naturalised status from the first generation onwards. The process of obtaining citizenship required only that they had been born in the same town where their parents first made landfall. For them the full range of primary, secondary and higher education, jobs in different technological fields and the entire spectrum of academic careers were within their reach, as easy or difficult for them

to obtain as for any other person across Latin America. Nothing distinguished them from any other Latin American. They received neither special treatment nor were they at a disadvantage and, consequently, could realistically hope for a career in medicine, engineering, law, politics, the Church or any other field, with all the rights and obligations that such a profession brings with it. A number of presidents of Central and South American countries have been of Lebanese immigrant descent, as have numerous cabinet ministers and parliamentary deputies, ambassadors, diplomats and politicians of every colour. The duties incumbent on people of Lebanese descent and the rights they enjoy are no different from those applying to people of other origins. All are equitable members of the same wider community, with no differentiation made. Colombia was once governed by a president of Lebanese descent, a second-generation immigrant. One of the best-known guerrilla leaders in the country, working to overturn the government, was also of Lebanese stock. Both were first and foremost Colombians.

Despite the long one-way voyages to Central and South America, the history of emigrants is inextricably linked to that of their native country, and vice-versa. Descendants of Lebanese immigrants began to take a close interest in the history of their parents' and grandparents' homeland, and back in Lebanon people are fully aware of how their compatriots came to want to emigrate, how many indeed made the journey and where they settled. They are disappointed, among other things, that immigrant descendants are unable to speak Arabic, that their links with the Old Country are either non-existent or not as strong as they should be.

Whilst the first emigrants from Lebanon and their offspring born in the host country did not return to the homeland, there were some instances of third-generation Lebanese Latinos returning to Lebanon – not to settle in Lebanon but rather for two quite different reasons. Thirty or forty years after the original journey westwards, the older Lebanese began to receive news from Beirut about the death of relatives and the inheritance they were to receive. Their grandchildren then made the trip back to Lebanon to claim the inheritance on behalf of the older generation and at the same time got to know both the land of their grandparents and those relatives who had not taken part in the exodus to the Americas. The second reason for the grandchildren's

trip to Lebanon was their simple urge to learn about the birthplace of their ancestors.

Trips take the form of a holiday and lead to personal links being forged between relatives born in countries thousands of miles apart and speaking two different languages. These new contacts are sustained through correspondence and subsequent visits. The younger Latin American generations of Lebanese stock are keen to learn Arabic and get to know the history of Lebanon. Lebanese descendants across the continent are increasingly interested in studying the biographies of their ancestors, compiling family trees and communicating the culture of Lebanon to others.

Lebanese migration to Central and South America is a phenomenon that could well serve as the subject of a sociological survey. It is unique in that the immigrants' reception in the host country was much smoother than the effort that preceded the voyage. Moreover, the travellers found it easy to settle into their unfamiliar, adoptive country and were assimilated into society without suffering discrimination. One possible reason for this is that the entire continent of America is a story of multiculturalism. The history of North, Central and South America is both the history of the indigenous inhabitants of the region and the history of Spain, Great Britain, Europe in general, Africa, Arab countries and the whole of Asia. The Americas have been a place where men, women and children from the four corners of the world have met, not only as visitors to the area, but as inhabitants of it. Each American is a participant in the history of every continent of the world. In Colombia there are no Lebanese Colombians, only Colombians in the purest sense of the word. In Peru there are no Japanese Peruvians, only Peruvians. In Argentina one is not an Italian-Argentinean, one is nothing more and nothing less than an Argentinean. Jorge Luis Borges, in his *Ulrica*, has a woman asking a man: “What does it mean to be Colombian?” To which the man replies: “I don't know. It's an act of faith”. His answer could come from the lips of any inhabitant of any country of the Americas when questioned on his nationality.

There is no doubt that Germans and foreigners living in Germany will find the situation of Lebanese emigrants in Latin America strange compared with the situation facing Turks in Germany. The Lebanese and their descendants have no trouble becoming naturalised citizens of

their adoptive country and enjoying all the rights accruing to citizens. Turks, on the other hand, never stop being Turkish, their integration is never complete, differentiation on grounds of nationality always exists, and this state of affairs shows no sign of changing. One reason for this difference is that in Latin American countries where the composition is so multicultural it is difficult for one person to call another person a foreigner. Secondly it is very important to bear in mind that the Turks moved to Germany as workers, while the Lebanese arrived in Central and South America as traders and businessmen and many of them had money with which to establish a livelihood. The Lebanese have been able to continue in the professions of their most ancient ancestors, the Phoenicians, whose greatest achievement was to spread trade and commerce across Europe. It is said of the Phoenicians that their greatest art consisted in disseminating the arts of others. The Phoenicians founded towns and important trading centres in Europe, fostering a degree of commercial exchange that led inevitably to cultural exchange. These are just two of the dimensions that distinguish the two instances of migration from another. They have to be considered in any political or sociological study of the phenomenon. This is a fascinating subject and is too big to be included in this paper.

The disparities between Lebanese migration and other instances of migration extend to differences in the behaviour of the respective migrants' descendants. It is important to emphasize that immigrant authors do not feel at all obliged – or even inspired – to write about the encounter between two cultures. A Colombian of Lebanese descent, for example, can choose as the theme for a book the same subject that a Colombian of any other extraction might choose. Only one of my novels, *La caída de los puntos cardinales*, is a story of characters stemming from Lebanon. In my other novels there may or may not be characters of Lebanese extraction, but the main figures all come from the immediate vicinity depicted in the book. No reference is made to any immigration; the books' themes and the private issues depicted within them are the universal themes and issues that people must confront regardless of their nationality. By the same token, writers of non-Lebanese provenance include in their stories characters that are of Lebanese extraction; these characters are part and parcel of society and are viewed neither as being the progeny of immigrants nor as being in any way less integrated into the fabric of society. The extent

to which one feels – and is – Colombian is the same whether one is an indigenous American, an African American or a person of Spanish, Italian or Lebanese descent. In the writing of the book none of these factors is relevant in any folkloric sense. In my novels and short stories I can concentrate on describing life in Colombia without having to include characters of Lebanese descent and without having to tackle issues of integration.

Descendants of the Lebanese find it easier to write about Lebanese immigration since they know stories and family details that do not feature in the history books. Yet they still encounter the same difficulties as writers who are not of Lebanese extraction. This has been my experience. In order to increase my knowledge of life in Lebanon and write my novel *La caída de los puntos cardinales*, I spent time talking with immigrants who had recently arrived from Lebanon and were settling in Europe. They completed my knowledge of Lebanese customs and the relations between religious communities. I also came to understand why and at what point these good relations might begin to deteriorate, and also the reasons these people had for leaving their homeland. Each individual's story drew me into the realms that I needed to enter if I was to write with authority on my characters, on the issues facing them and on the Arabic language. I started learning Arabic so as to be able to colour my own language with the kind of Arabic inflections and colloquialisms that would feature in the dealings my characters had with each other. During the private and professional trips I made to Colombia and via correspondence I managed to get access to a lot of documents including birth certificates, marriage certificates and death certificates. I had a lot of conversations face-to-face with people and over the telephone in which I refreshed my memory and clarified references to money, precious metals and other accoutrements that emigrants had brought with them. When I was a child in Colombia, on visiting the homes of Lebanese families one still saw artefacts that reflected the purchasing power of the family concerned, objects such as gold coins, hookahs, caps and canes.

I researched the history of Colombia, the key junctures in the changing course of events and the reasons for its inability to transform itself swiftly when the occasion demanded for it. I revised my geography and studied the means of transportation available to successive generations and eras and on port activities along the Atlantic coast. I

read up on the conditions endured during sea passages from the East and from Europe to our Continent, on the customs procedures at the ports of entry and the prerequisites that prospective immigrants were required to fulfil. By reading and observing I was able to fill the gaps in my real experience that had opened up since childhood. It was a learning process that coincided with the inspiration I needed in order to be able to reproduce the information in an organic fashion, not as one who knows, but as one who feels. Without realising it, I had been writing this novel ever since I was a child. I say this because descendants of the Lebanese have a strong sentimental link to Lebanon, even though the link is not a conscious one. Everyone develops this sentimental attachment sooner or later; a desire is awoken to visit Lebanon, to learn Arabic, to enter another world. And the descendants of Lebanese immigrants come to acquire a faculty for broadening their sympathies and understanding how to embrace two separate worlds.